EWB-SA Leadership Summit 2018 by Muhammed Razzak

Engineers without Borders South Africa held their 7th Annual Summit this year from 22-26 January 2018. It was held at Anglo American’s Centre for Experiential Learning (CEL), who kindly sponsored the venue and accommodation. The summit welcomed 28 student delegates from 8 University Chapters: UNISA, Wits, UJ, UP, UKZN, Maties, TUT and UCT.

The focus for this Leadership Retreat was developing the delegates personal leadership capacity as they venture to lead their various chapters. In our (EWB-SA Leadership) many and varied experiences we have learnt that leadership begins with a solid understanding of self.

The sessions included inspiring speeches, engaging discussion from various prominent South African leaders, special projects for the leaders to practice leading and discussion sessions. The speakers included Professor Ian R Jandrell, Dean of Engineering at Wits; Manglin Pillay, CEO of SAICE; James Hu, Head of Learning and Development at Unilever for Africa; Vanessa Naicker, Head of Business Improvement - Support at Anglo American; and Neo Hutiri, Founder of Technovera. The retreat also included practical (experiential learning) sessions from the CEL’s resident experts and the EWB-SA volunteers.

Day 1

Wits Dean of Engineering and Built Environment, Professor Ian R Jandrell’s keynote focused on how young engineers are the best placed individuals to make tangible, significant positive changes in our society. He challenged the delegates perception of engineering, terming it a social science and the liberals arts education of the 21st century. He ended with the inspiring story of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who completed much of his life work by the age of 33, proving once again that young engineers are best placed to make tangible positive changes in our society. Isambard built among others the Thames Tunnel, Bristol Docks, the Great Western Railway, Paddington Station, the first suspension bridge and the first steamship. All of this by the age of 33! Isambard faced numerous, and what often must’ve seemed like insurmountable odds from government, civil society and just technologically, but he was resilient and resourceful and managed to pull many of his projects off. He failed along the way, but he persevered and that was the key. A key aspect of EWB-SA delegates is also failing forward hence the entire group could relate.

The students were given the flexibility to facilitate their own sessions in the evenings. The first session came from a Ted-Talk by Chimamanda Adichie’s Danger of a Single Story. The students had frank conversations about when they heard a single story and associated it with an entire group of people, countries and they spoke about when they fell victim to this. The discussion went on until they ran out of things to add. It indicated an amazing heartfelt retreat was on the way.
Day 2

The second day focused on personal leadership and change management. The sessions were facilitated by the CEL’s resident experts Dewald Esterhuizen and Jill Harris. Jill's session focused on the personal leadership and social aspect of change management. She talk the delegates through a theory of leadership, personality types, traits and how to interact with people when dealing with and applying change. This resonated particularly with delegates, as many have experienced some resistance in a developing projects in communities. Delegates learned a lot about themselves through leadership and personality training, such as leadership style, perception (Jahari’s Window) and personality traits. In learning about themselves, they learnt how to interact and connect with others so as to bring them onboard the change to. Most importantly is to make every stakeholder part of the process.

Dewald's session focused on the technical side of change management; process purpose, waste and optimization. This is again applicable outside engineering, as Dewald pointed out through a story of convincing his wife through a process of 6 months to move the spare toilet paper to bathroom instead of the pantry. Change is hard!

The lessons learnt in the sessions were then applied in the CEL’s model factory, where delegates had to observe the process for producing pistons. They then had to recognize process waste and how to optimise it. The hardest part was convincing the different station operators, with their own unique and somewhat exaggerated personalities, to change their workflow. You have to find a way of reaching every operator, each taking a unique way dependent on the operator and the delegate.

The second evening the Ted Talk Radical Candor by Kim Scott’s which focused on the power of giving people honest feedback. Something most people are not ready to hear but often need too. This was discussed, and ways of adding it to the structure of how we lead our chapters was also discussed.

Day 3

Wednesday focused on guest speakers who reflected on their journey’s and what they’ve learnt along the way. The speakers included Manglin Pillay, CEO of South African Institution of Civil Engineering, who focused on the modern engineer and ethics. Ethics in South Africa, in both public and private sector have become a difficult thing to come by; but Manglin says that strong moral and ethical values are need to take the world and South Africa. Unethical leadership in South Africa is letting us down, and it is up to young engineers to take up the mantle. He recounted a story of him working as a young project manager in the public sector and being offered transport via a private jet. You need a lot of courage to turn down an offer such as that, but you need to. Elaine & Patrizia, from WSP, took delegates on a personal discovery adventure to learn more about themselves.
Neo Hutiri, founder and CEO of Technovera, winner of Hack.Jozi, spoke about his journey as a through entrepreneurship and engineering. Neo founded Technovera after waiting in line for hours for his TB medication. Technovera currently focused on reducing waiting time for patients to collect chronic medication in the public health sector, through “medicine lockers.” Neo spoke about his long, arduous journey after founding the company. He focused on the need to engage with every stakeholder, incorporating their feedback and making them an integral part of the product development process. At the same time, one should not abdicate one’s role as a developer/designer. Most importantly, one should leave one’s biases at the door, at really listen to the stakeholders. The process of iteration, and refinement was highlighted in his talk.

The highlight of the afternoon, however, was Dr Noko Phala. Dr Phala is the Head of Business Improvement Capability development at Anglo American. Initially from a rural town in Limpopo, he was schooled by his grandmother and went on to graduate from UCT with first class honours in Chemical Engineering. He then went onto complete his PhD within 3 years. While he has continue research with Anglo, his role is now about “thinking about thinking.” How we absorb information, how we retain it and how we use it. He demonstrated how we often aren’t taught how the brain works and so don’t know how to use it correctly. With a couple of, might I say, parlour tricks up his sleeve he woo’ed delegates by being able to recall every page of this months Popular Mechanics. Not only was he able to do that, but apparently he only read the magazine once! Everyone can do this, according to Dr Phala; we merely need to train ourselves to absorb the information the way the brain wants to absorb it. He also performed a few other tricks, such as making water disappear- perhaps just to make light of the delegates from Cape Town situation. Noko ended with 5 hopes for the delegates:

1. Hope to be the best
2. Have a plan but be flexible
3. Be curious and READ, READ, READ
4. Understand and have an interest in people
5. Improve the human condition

Our last Ted Talk was by Ricardo Semler’s, Radical Autonomy, practices a radical form of corporate democracy, rethinking everything from board meetings to how workers report their vacation days (they don’t have to). It’s a vision that rewards the wisdom of workers, promotes work-life balance — and leads to some deep insight on what work, and life, is really all about and about education.

Day 4

Thursday was about the future! James Hu, Head of Learning and Development in Africa at Unilever and EWBSA Board Member who spoke to us about organisational branding and how that can lead to the failure of a product making reference to some controversial Unilever adverts of the past? He made the group of students aware of how much goes into designing and planning and how regardless of all that things can still “go wrong”. He also touched on personal branding until he ran out of time.
Vanessa Naicker, Head of Business Improvement - Support at Anglo American and EWBSA Board Member, spoke about metrics, accountability and excellence; enthralling delegates with her experience in the industry after 20 years. Her session was very interactive, and focused around what makes an excellent leader. Lastly, she provided 7 R’s for prototyping ideas:

1. Relevance
2. Revolutionary
3. Repid
4. Rought
5. Right
6. Relatively Effective
7. Replicable

The delegates then went out to plan for the year ahead, for their different university chapters. They then presented a reflection of the year that was, what will be improved and what the next year will look like during the Gala dinner. What was clear from the reflections, was that EWBers are very much like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. They often fail, but they are resilient and resourceful and results driven.

They will try again and do what it takes to get the job done. Some huge success were had over the past years, on the backs of huge failures. Examples of success projects/events/workshops help this year included:

- Biodigesters installed in various communities after setbacks the previous year
- An #IoT4SG (Internet of things for Social Good) Design Challenge which was held nationally despite the initial delay
- Human Centred Design courses were help at all chapters this year, with one chapter holding two courses as the first one failed!
- Some chapters held their first vacation work eligible projects, after a few years of trying to get it working
- Some held a speed-mentoring session and career fairs

The special projects assigned to the students included

1) The organization of the Gala Dinner
2) A presentation on the Roles & Responsibilities of the different chapters positions (i.e. Chair, Vice-Chair)
3) A presentation on the relevance of EWB-SA in the world right now.

The dinner venue looked amazing and the classroom looked amazing with the balloons decorated by the students. The two presentations were given, the attendance awards were given and funny awards presented.

We have been working with students chapters for 7 years and what we have learnt is that it is important to allow the students to fail forward as this really creates a group of young
professionals who are resilient, resourceful and results driven. EWB-SA has become a safe place for practising leadership all the while trying to reach out to local communities. We truly are focusing on empowering engineers so that they can step out and empower communities.